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SUBJECT: URIBE REBUTS QUESTIONABLE ARO MASSACRE TESTIMONY

¶1. President Alvaro Uribe told the media on April 23 that testimony by convicted criminal Francisco Villalba that Uribe was involved in the 1997 paramilitary El Aro massacre was not credible and invented to obtain judicial benefits. On October 22, 1997, 15 people in Ituango, Antioquia were massacred by paramilitaries with support from elements of the military. Colombian Courts and the Inter-American Court for Human Rights found the GOC liable in the massacre and ordered restitution paid to victims' families. Uribe was governor of Antioquia at the time. Villalba claims Uribe and his brother Santiago met with the paramilitaries to discuss the rescue of eight kidnap victims, and later congratulated them on a successful operation. He said the paramilitary leaders who met with Uribe included Salvatore Mancuso and Carlos Castano.

¶2. Uribe and the news media have pointed out numerous, significant inconsistencies in Villalba's story. Uribe said that at least one of the supposed participants that Villalba placed at the massacre--General Manosalva--died three months before the event occurred. Fondelibertad reports that there is no record that the kidnappings described by Villalba took place, and no other paramilitaries have referred to the existence of a "Toledo Bloc" which Villalba claims was the group responsible for the massacre. Presidential legal advisor Edmundo del Castillo told us Villalba's testimony in two other cases has been discredited, and that several witnesses, including Mancuso, have rebutted his claims about Uribe's involvement in El Aro.

¶3. "El Tiempo" reported April 23 that FARC member Lidya Alape ("Jessica"), now in jail and reportedly involved in several mysterious bombings in Bogota in July, 2006, had several conjugal visits with Villalba and may have helped him invent his testimony. Villalba was sentenced to 33 years in prison for his involvement in the El Aro massacre and 37 years for his participation in the Balsita massacre. Prior to his testimony against Uribe, he applied for benefits under the Justice and Peace law that would reduce his sentence to 8 months. The Prosecutor General's Office (Fiscalia) heard Villalba's testimony, but it is the Congressional Commission of Accusations that would hear any criminal case against the president.

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